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ABSTRACT

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For the Technical Communicator: Pursuing Professional Identity and Maturity

Eugene A. Cogan

Presented at the 21st International Technical Communications Conference
St. Louis, Missouri May 1974

HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION
300 North Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314

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PREFATORY NOTE

This paper is based upon an invited address to the 21st International Technical Communication Conference, St. Louis, May 1974. The conference was sponsored by the Society for Technical Communication.

The analysis presented is directed specifically to technical communicators. However, the material is germane to any young occupational group in the process of professionalization since it is based primarily upon the social psychology of group development.

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FOR THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR:
Pursuing Professional Identity and Maturity

by Eugene A. Cogan

In preparing this presentation, I found it useful to arrange my script in the form of answers to six questions:

1. Who am I? or, What is the basis for my views?
2. What does "profession" mean?
3. What groups are similar to STC in origin and state of professionalization?
4. What would I prescribe for the pursuit of professional identity and maturity?
5. What would I proscribe for the pursuit of professional identity and maturity?
6. What will the future hold for the technical communicator group?

Viewpoint

I am by training, self-concept, preference, and viewpoint primarily a social psychologist. I am a member of about half a dozen Associations, including Society for Technical Communication (STC). I am a technical communicator; this is because the processes of science, the scientific method to which I subscribe, requires there be *communication* of results and conclusions as the final *validating* step.

For 15 years, I have spent much of my time doing technical review of research studies and reports; my reviews are mainly for technical adequacy and validity, but they also include attention to conventional communications matters. I also was responsible for my organization's inhouse technical publications unit for a decade. All of these elements contribute to the views I will express; their impact on my views is probably in the order I named them.

Profession

The concept "Profession" is what I call a "sloppy concept." To no one's surprise, sloppy concept is in contrast to "neat concept." Despite the frivolous terminology, sloppy concepts are respectable and important in science, and approaches to how they can be defined have been treated formally in the literature of the Philosophy of Science. The distinction between sloppy and neat is, approximately, analogous to the distinction between connotation and denotation.

Profession is a social concept and, as such, has the two aspects of "as viewed by the person" and "as viewed by others." These views may—or may not—coincide. I shall pose a partial definition of profession using the technique Abraham Kaplan described under the title "specification of meaning." Professor Kaplan of the University of Michigan described how to use a set of indicators to define sloppy concepts by a kind of averaging process. That is, no one indicator is either necessary or sufficient. The meaning of a concept derives from the "*set*" of indicators in combination.

What do we mean when we say profession?

In part, we mean attributes pertaining to services that are provided:

- These services are useful.

- They are provided within a set of ethical bounds and rules that are defined by the group.
- Only a particular set of specifically defined services are provided.

Some attributes pertain to characteristics of the individual:

- Is well paid.
- Is highly skilled in a rare capability.
- Has credentials of some sort.
- Has special title (such as Professor).
- Is regulated and/or licensed by government bodies.
- Has high status.

Some attributes pertain to the group as a whole:

- Provides a specialized, standardized definition of the occupation.
- Establishes a formal body, invariably called an Association or Society.
- Sponsors technical journals and other technical literature.
- Foments and monitors training and educational programs.
- Develops mechanisms for sharing experiences, finding employment, setting fees or salaries, and so on.

Reduced to minimum essentials, a profession consists of a set of people performing socially useful, specialized services for the public. These services require unusual skills and knowledge, and social mechanisms are developed to validate the competence both of the training programs and of the members of the profession. This definition fits well for occupations that have been in the process of professionalization for many generations—for example, medicine or law; for young groups, those in process of becoming, of pursuing professional status, the definition provides a picture of directions of activity.

An occupational group pursues the status of profession through the activities of its association or society. This fact leads to the peculiar paradox that a professional society must be in existence before the profession exists!

Societies and associations are complex creatures that serve a variety of purposes. We can, for example, distinguish between scientific societies, professional societies, and unions. How do these differ? Scientific societies are oriented to the specialized subject matter of their members; in these societies, members are oriented to one another and their focus is on their common subject matter interest. Professional societies, on the other hand, are oriented to the services performed for the public, how these may be improved, and how their quality may be assured. Labor unions, by contrast, are organizations of members for purposes of dealing with employers. The varieties of societies are most readily distinguished by their focus: professional toward the public; scientific toward one another; labor toward employers. In practice, most societies are combinations of more than one focus. Further, since members of a society have diverse interests, there is frequent internal debate as to the proper role of a society.

Kindred Groups

The technical communicator is a World War II baby, and the occupation derived out of defense-related activities. Technical communicators are not the only World War II babies. Disciplines with similar origins are Operations Research and Systems Analysis, Computer Technology, Management Sciences, Information Retrieval, and many other small and large groups. By virtue of recency—and thirty or so years is recent—these groups share certain characteristics. Their members have very diverse backgrounds; sometimes a person's background has only peculiar relation, if any, to the activities in which he or she is engaged. The activities performed by members of the group change rapidly because they are allied to explosively changing technologies. There is a severe lack of training and educational facilities or standards for these groups to develop people to

perform within the occupations. There is an implicit fear or discomfort that the activities performed in the discipline may not be worthwhile. This anxiety is shared by members of the group and their employers. These disciplines are all pursuing status as professions.

To provide perspective for technical communication, it is useful to consider one of the other World War II babies in terms of the characteristics related to recency. For this purpose, I have chosen Operations Research and Systems Analysis, an occupation with which I am reasonably familiar.

The compound name itself is instructive. About ten years ago, great care was taken to distinguish Operations Research from Systems Analysis. At present, the designation OR/SA is most common because no one appears convinced there really is a difference between them. The definition of OR/SA itself is far from standardized. Among those extant are the application of the scientific method to the solution of practical problems; the development, validation, and use of mathematical models to represent operations; the application of a particular set of mathematical tools (e.g., linear programing, queueing theory, and so on) to solve operational problems; the use of analysis, simulation, and computers in solving problems; the development of alternative courses of action and presentation of their cost and effectiveness to decision makers; and so on.

The educational and training background of most OR/SA people ranges from bachelor's through doctorate, with some falling short of the bachelor's degree and some with multiple graduate degrees. Among the major fields of training in the occupation are mathematics, philosophy, economics, physics, psychology, computer programing, chemical engineering, electronics engineering, business administration, statistics, English literature, and so on.

There are, at present, three main professional associations for OR/SA people: Operations Research Society of America, The Institutes of Management Sciences, and Military Operations Research Society. At some time in the future, these will either be consolidated or become more clearly differentiated.

Explicit training for OR/SA, leading to graduate degrees including the doctorate, is becoming common. It is, however, interesting to note some are in mathematics departments, some in business schools, some in engineering schools, and some in schools of industrial design. Clearly, what the graduates of these disparate places can do will differ sharply; the bulk of new people entering the OR/SA occupation is still largely from other sources.

Prescription

There are a variety of things that groups or disciplines can do to professionalize. My prescription for technical communicators consists of six basic thrusts.

First, define very carefully and thoroughly the services that a technical communicator performs; this definition should include attention to whether subgroupings of services are pertinent.

Second, establish your identification as Communication *Engineers*; you are engineers in the sense that the knowledges and skills you use come from classical, basic humanity, and science disciplines; further, it is typical for technical communicators to work in a team mode as do other engineers.

Third, increase sharply the variety and sophistication with which disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, and philosophy make their intrusion into the hearts, minds, and tool kits of technical communicators.

Fourth, increase your orientation towards innovation and, especially, your orientation toward research in your field; for a discipline tied to new technology, innovation and research are absolutely essential.

Fifth, define carefully and thoroughly the occupational requirements for technical communicators and the associated training and educational curriculae needed to prepare people to be technical communicators.

Sixth, make your presence known, vigorously, to governmental and industrial associations.

Proscription

First, a note of personal confession. In planning my talk and preparing my outline, the pattern of Prescription-Proscription was irresistible. However, in implementation, I found parallel development of the two didn't work because proscriptions are better stated as prescriptions of their converses.

After formulating my main set of prescriptions I, fortunately, found some leftovers. On close scrutiny, they turn out to be evolutionary (or trial and error) steps intrinsic to the process of professionalization. Although natural to development, these features are, nonetheless, dysfunctional. I herewith offer these dysfunctional leftovers as my proscriptions.

My first proscription is: Beware the Philosopher's Stone. There are many rather simple rules of thumb that generally serve to improve technical communication. Rules that provide useful guidelines include avoiding German-style, three-page-long sentences, using consistent terminology, favoring small words, organizing material logically, and so on. However, none of these or any other is an absolute, and all should simply be a few among the many tools in the communicator's bag, these tools used with skill and judgment, rather than mechanically. Avoid transforming a guideline into a Philosopher's Stone because rigid, mechanical, or stereotyped use of these rules reduces the technical communicator to an expensive simulation of a computer. Lola M. Zook, several years ago, developed this thesis extensively in her STC paper, *Training the Editor: Skills are Not Enough.*[1]

My second proscription is: Redirect efforts from mutual reassurances. I think too much time and attention are paid in STC to "before and after" technical communicator examples or to "horrible examples" resulting when technical communicators are ignored. This kind of insistence that "they need us" *shared with one another* seems to me to be more prevalent in STC meetings than in the meetings I attend of other societies.

My third proscription is: Beware of extremes in status relationships with clients. At different times in STC, I have sensed excessive obsequiousness and humility in relationship with the scientist and engineer, or condescension about the scientist's and engineer's virtual incapacity with language, or a great deal of attention to the strategies and tactics of coping with the intransigent scientist and engineer. All of these mirror status touchiness that risks creating interpersonal problems.

My fourth proscription also involves status: Beware of apologizing for doing what you are *supposed* to be doing. While humility is never inappropriate, a demeaning stance toward one's work in itself demeans the work.

After formulating my four proscriptions, I looked at them closely and found they represent different aspects of one thing: steps in the pursuit and definition of professional identity. The solution rests in attaining a high degree of self-assurance that one is earning one's keep by performing a useful service for the public, and doing so through the exercise of rare, specialized, and sophisticated skills and knowledge. The proscriptions represent chinks in that self-assurance. These chinks, I hasten to add, are far from unique to technical communicators. Careful observation and analysis will show at least traces of these four chinks in security in any occupational group.

[1] HumRRO Professional Paper 28-67, June 1967.

The Future

As to what the future holds for technical communicators, I project the profession will continue to evolve, it will survive, and it will prosper. I offer this forecast out of my conviction that technical communicators are performing valuable functions and will continue in that vein. Hopefully, they will continually increase the value of their functions as the discipline continues to evolve.

I further forecast that technical communicators will assume more and more the trappings of older, earlier established professions. The trappings that will be assumed will, unfortunately, be the bad ones as well as the good. Thus, mechanisms to exclude capable people from performing as technical communicators will evolve; concern with credentials will tend to become stifling and so on. But, improved average capabilities, minimum standards, better pay, and better working conditions will also appear.

I especially forecast that exactly what technical communicators do will become clearly defined and will be sharply distinctive from what others do. Further, the service being performed will become more specialized and technical, and consequently, will require more specialized and technical training. These will be provided by formal curriculae and also by the technical literature of the profession.

FINAL COMMENTS

To conclude, I shall formulate three footnotes. By doing so, I will, at the least, help qualify my remarks as a technical presentation.

First, although I used the term "profession" in my presentation for convenience, I must emphasize the term is an oversimplification. There is a process we may call professionalization. This process, as evolution, is an ever-continuing one, and it would be purely arbitrary (and probably not really important) to identify a point where an occupation has "made it." In my opinion, it is pointless to debate whether technical communicators or any other group has or has not "made it."

Second, I recommend STC give careful attention to developing a code of ethics. This code should, at least, deal with rules for the behavior of technical communicators in relation to fellow technical communicators, to employers, to clients, to other professionals, and to the public.

And, as my final footnote, to adapt an ancient rabbinic statement,[1] the essential, core meaning of "profession" is "useful service for the public," all else is commentary.

[1] Adapted from a very old folk-tale about Rabbi Hillel who lived some two thousand years ago. Asked to summarize the entire Bible while standing on one foot, he said: What is hateful to you, do not do unto your brother, the rest is commentary

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